The Two-Troll Variant of the Bear’s Son Folktale in Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstra and Gríms saga loðinkinna

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The purpose of this paper is (1) to add an episode from the neglected Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstra to the list of Old Icelandic analogues to the two-troll variant of the bear’s son folktale, (2) to compare motifs in the episode with those of the battle against Grendel’s mother in the Old English Beowulf, (3) to point out a literary relationship between Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstra and Gríms saga loðinkinna and (4) to show that both sagas copied from an older, written source.1

I

Nowhere in the extensive literature comparing the bear’s son folktale as it occurs in the epic poem, Beowulf,2 with over a dozen parallels in

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1 The most recent edition of these sagas is by Guðry Jónsson in Formáltar sógur Norðurlanda, 4 vols. (Akureyri, 1954), the former in IV, 287-318 and the latter in II, 183-198.

2 I.e. the two-troll variant, in which the first battle is a wrestling match against a male monster who escapes to his cave mortally wounded, and the second ensues when the hero, who has followed its trail, enters the subterranean abode to fight with the female. Summarized in Antti Arne and Stith Thompson, The Types of the Folktale, 2nd rev. edn., in FF Communications, LXXV, No. 184 (Helsinki, 1964), pp. 90-92, and discussed in detail in Friedrich Panzer, Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte, 2 vols. (München, 1910-12), I, passim. For a summary of arguments to 1958 relating Beowulf to some ten Old Norse sagas, cf. R. W. Chambers, Beowulf, An Introduction to the Study of the Poem, 3rd edn. (Cambridge U. P., 1959). Useful lists of sundry battle motifs are found in Inger Bøberg’s Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature, in Bibliotheca Arnamagnaeana, XXVII (Copenhagen, 1966), cf. especially G 275,8; 95; G 500,1; G 512,7; H 1562,8.
Old Norse literature, is mention made of a short passage in Hálfdanar saga Brømfjóstra, a mythical-heroic saga preserved in three fifteenth-century manuscripts, but probably composed in the first half of the fourteenth century.1 The oversight might have been due to the brevity of the passage or to the fact that the episode is immediately followed by a different, longer variant of the same folktale (of the helpful ogre type) which is much more essential to the plot of the story. Because the saga has never been translated into English, the appropriate passage is given here in translation, with all the possibly relevant motifs consecutively numbered to facilitate discussion of them in the following section.2

One day (1) Hálfdan went alone onto some glaciers to hunt. He journeyed all that day. (2) At last he came to a certain narrow path. He had (3) an axe in his hand, which Óttarr the earl had given to him. Hálfdan went on the path. (4) Tracks were cut into the cliff, but between the tracks was no shorter than four yards. Hálfdan hooked the point of the axe-head up into the tracks and (5) pulled himself up along the shaft in this way until he got up on the cliff. There he saw (6) a large cave and inside (7) a bright fire.

He went to the doorway of the cave and saw that (8) two trolls were sitting by the fire, one that looked like a woman and the other like a man, and they had a cauldron between them. (9) There was in it the flesh of both horses and of men. The man had a hook in his nose, the woman a ring. It was their game that he fastened the hook in the ring and the two were then joined, but when the hook slipped out of the ring, the old woman fell over backwards. Then she said, “I do not want to play this game, Járnnefr, my dear.” “So it will be, my (10) Sleggja”, he said, and they had then finished the contents of the

1 AM 152, fol. 410; AM 571r, 40; AM 579v, 40. Its popularity is attested to by some four dozen paper variants. The original is dated to ca. 1300 by Hálfdór Hermansson, Bibliography of the Mythical-Heroic Sagas, Islandica, V (1912), p. 19; to “not younger than around 1700”, Finnur Jónsson, Den oldnorske og oldislandske litterature historie, 2 vols. (København, 1920–24), II, 821.
2 The text is found in chapter 4 of G. Jónsson’s edn. (IV, 298–299), with several sentences appended from the end of chapter 5 on p. 300.

cauldron. Járnnefr began to speak, “Is there something left, Sleggja”, he said, “of the twenty-five men, (11) which I brought here by enchantment last winter?” She said very little about that. Then she went farther back in the cave and (12) came back with a man under each arm, put them down by the fire and said that there were no more left. Hálfdan saw now that these were gallant men and so alike, that he couldn’t distinguish one from the other, and Hálfdan thought that they were twins.

Then Hálfdan stepped quickly into the cave and up to the (13) male troll and (14) chopped at his neck with the axe so that it took off his head, but he remained sitting as before. The old woman then sprang up and spoke, (15) “It is good, Hálfdan”, she said, “that we have met up with each other”. (16) He drew back but she pressed the attack until she reached a sword. She assailed him tenaciously, but he defended himself well. Sleggja (17) cast down the sword and ran beneath Hálfdan. (18) Their wrestling was hard and long, and Sleggja forced him all around the cave, but he was so agile that she never got him off his feet. He was pushed until they came to (19) a gorge. It was both deep and wide. Then Sleggja was closer to the bank of the gorge. At that moment (20) her feet were jerked out from under her and she fell down into the gorge. Hálfdan held on to her by her hair. (21) He saw a sword adorned with gold lying near him. He drew the sword quickly and cut off Sleggja’s head. Hálfdan asked who had granted assistance to him or given him the sword, but no one answered him at that time. … But at another place there is to be said of Hálfdan’s men, that they were (22) sick at heart about him … and Hálfdan took from there (23) gold, silver and many treasures and came back safe to his men.

In the translation above, all possible points of correspondence with Beowulf have been numbered, both those which can be pointed to as hard facts as well as those which conjure up remembrances and feelings of the Old English version. To begin with, the hero, Hálfdan

II
The two-troll variant

containing horse meat and human flesh (§9), and the carrying off of people to their lair has been replaced by their being brought to the cave by the use of magic (§11). The female’s name, Sleggja (§10), meaning a large hammer, especially one to use on iron or stone, may possibly be connected semantically with a proposed etymology for Grendel as the “destroyer”, from the Old English verb *grindan* ‘to grind’, and her return to the main cave carrying a man under each arm (§12) reminds one of Grendel’s lumbering away bearing the body of Æsclere and the arm of her son.

Thereupon Hálfdan rushes in and challenges the male giant first (§13), but beheading it in a manner reminiscent of Beowulf’s violent decapitation of the already-dead Grendel deep in the cave (§14). In a small way it lends support to the theory that the second “battle” with Grendel is a remnant of the common folktale version in which the giant first loses his arm in the wrestling match in the house, is chased into the cave and defeated again.1 Sleggja’s recognition of the hero she has never met (§15) is not unknown in folktales, but here it is noteworthy because the bear’s son folktale has the two-troll variant which allows the return of the male monster to the female and presumably the chance to relate the outcome of the first battle. The result in the Old English epic is the revenge sought by Grendel’s dam.

During the battle down in the cave, there is evidence that the motif of the ogre vulnerable only to a special sword has not been lost in the saga, for it is implicit that the axe used to decapitate Járnnefr was useless against the female, just as Beowulf’s sword could not pierce Grendel’s mother. As the armed hero is standing opposite the defenseless ogress, the text has him “draw back” [sic], his axe is never mentioned again and his opponent has enough time to attack him “until she reached a sword” (§16)! In the epic poem it is Beowulf who throws away his sword to begin a wrestling match, while in the saga it is the giantess who has been left holding the useless motif, throwing it down in order to initiate hand-to-hand combat (§17). As in Beowulf

1 Oferðeðe þa æþelings bearn | stêap stânþlîò, stîge nearwe, | enge ënþþæas, uncôð gêldå, Beowulf, lines 1408–10. Edited by Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1941).

the struggle is hard and long, with the giantess enjoying a slight advantage (¶ 18) until they come to the edge of a gorge (¶ 19), the presence of which may be related to the gorge under dessa genitur into which the fyrgenstræam plunges in the distorted and much-discussed scenery of the Old English epic.\(^1\) In the saga the troll’s feet are pulled out from under her and she falls down into the gorge (¶ 20), while the hero throws the monster to the ground in Beowulf. Divine intervention plays a major role, too, in both versions of the battle, allowing Beowulf to draw a golden-hilted sword from the equipment of the ogress and to decapitate her with it, while Hálfdan finds a sword which mysteriously appears, also adorned with gold, and uses it to behead the ogress (¶ 21).

Slightly further on in the saga narrative (¶ 22) the reader is informed that Hálfdan’s men were hugsjúkir, ‘sick at heart’, just as Beowulf’s men were mödes söve, ‘sick at heart’ at his absence, but the epic hero returns with valuable booty and the saga hero also comes back to camp with gold, silver, and jewels from the cave (¶ 23).

This lengthy list of similar motifs in corresponding order is sufficient to demonstrate a link between Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstur and the bear’s son folk tale, especially as it occurs in literary form in Beowulf. In fact, the saga’s description of the trek to the cave and the battle with the female monster are closer to the Old English epic version than is the famous Grettis saga or any other single Old Norse saga.

### III

It has been well-known for a long time that the bear’s son folk tale crops up in a number of mythical-heroic sagas, but one of them can now be shown to contain verbatim parallels to the passage discussed above and deserves to be mentioned here. There exists a short tale entitled Grims saga løhinkima, possibly composed as early as 1300, which has previously been connected with Örvar-Ödds saga and Ketils saga hängs, with which the link is quite obvious, but never before with Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstur.\(^1\) In the passages below, the verbal parallels between these two sagas have been printed in italics.

**Hálfdanar saga Brönumfóstur**

Hálfdan gekk i einstigi ... Hálfdan kraæht axarhynunn upp i sporin ok las sik svá upp eftir shaftinu, far til er hann komst upp á hjargit. Dar så hann heli stóran ok í bjartan eld.

Hann gengur at hellislyrum ok sér, at tvau tröll sáu við eldinn, annat keensvipt, en annat karlsvipt ... ok hjó á hála lónum med öxinni, svá at af tók höfuðit, en hann sitr sem ódr. Kerling sprettir þá upp ok ... hleypur undir Hálfdan. Beira glima var hörð ok lóng ... ok hjó af Sleggju höfuðit.

**Grims saga løhinkima**

Dar sá hann framan í bjørgunum heli mikinn. Dar var einstigi upp at ganga ... varð hann at kraæja öxinni í annat sporit, er hann stóð í örú, ok las sik svá eftir shaftinu, ok svá komst hann upp í hellinn. Dar sá hann brenna bjartan eld, ok sáu tvau tröll við eldinn. Pat var karl ok kerling ... ok hjó til Hrinimis karls svá hart, at af tók höfuðit. Pá spratt Hyrja kerling upp ok rann á hann, ok tóku þau at glima, ok var þeira atgangr karl harð or langr ... Hjó hann þá af henni höfuðit.

The motifs which the two sagas have in common may be summarized as follows: in both are found the large cave with a bright fire located up in a mountain, which must be approached in each saga by an einstigi (a narrow path) followed by a climb up tracks (once again referred to by the strange word, spor) far apart in the mountainside where the hero uses his axe as a pick and pulls himself up by the shaft. Once at the cave mouth, the hero sees a male and female troll sitting by the fire, waits a short time, rushes in and immediately decapitates the male. The female springs up, the hero’s axe is forgotten in the rush, and a long, hard wrestling match ensues. After the ogress falls down, she is beheaded by the hero. This lengthy sequence of similar motifs indicates a very possible literary link and the sequence of

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1. Grims saga is also extant in three vellum mss. from the fifteenth century, AM 3430, 410, AM 477, 410, and AM 567, 410, IV. The original has been dated to ca. 1300 by Hermansson, p. 19, and to the beginning of the fourteenth century by F. Jónsson, II, 806. Örvar-Ödds saga has been critically edited by R. C. Boer, Örvar-Ödds saga (Leiden, 1888) and with more notes in the Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, II (Halle, 1892), most recently in G. Jónsson, II, 199–363. Ketils saga is found in G. Jónsson’s edn., II, 149–181.
verbally parallel portions of text confirms that a conscious, literary borrowing is involved.

IV

Neither the motifs held in common nor the verbatim parallels contain enough information to indicate which saga, if any, is the donor of this variant of the bear’s son folktale and which is the recipient. An examination of the bear’s son motifs which are not held in common provides the evidence to demonstrate that neither saga has borrowed from the other. *Grims saga* fails to mention such important features as the hero’s weapon as a gift, the cannibalism of the monsters, the magical intervention on the hero’s behalf and the sudden appearance of the sword ornamented with gold in the giant’s cave.

What *Grims saga* does supply is the initial battle at the house in the forest and the wounding of an ogress who is followed to a cave, where she reports of Grím’s deed to her parents before falling dead. Although this first encounter contains no wrestling match, its presence at this point, followed by the pursuit to the cave, is in accordance with numerous versions of the bear’s son folktale recorded even beyond the boundaries of northern Europe,¹ and would account for the unmotivated recognition on Sleggja’s part in *Hálfdanar saga* at the hero’s sudden, unexplained appearance.

Further evidence to show that this first battle in *Grims saga* was part of the original version is supplied by *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Ketils saga hængs*, which also have closely-related initial encounters. *Örvar-Odds saga* could not have donated directly to *Grims saga*, however, because it, alone, has abandoned the house in the forest for a ship, nor could *Ketils saga* have been the donor, for it has spread the action in the house over two summers and turned the battle in the cave into a farce.² While it is theoretically possible that *Örvar-Odds saga* and/or

1 Ketils saga borrowed this section from *Grims saga*, this appears unlikely given the widespread view that *Grims saga* is the youngest of the three.¹

One parallel which is of great interest because it is a verbal one linking both *Ketils saga* and *Grims saga*, occurs just after the hero has buried his axe between the shoulder blades of the monster that is subsequently followed to its cave. In the former it is stated that: *Katli varð laus óxin, ok stóð hún fóst í sárinu*, while the latter reads: *Grími varð laus óxin við höggit, ok stóð hún fóst í sárinu*.

The older, written version posited above as the source of the bear’s son episode in both *Hálfdanar saga* Brúmfóstra and *Grims saga lodínkinna* may also have been used as a literary source by *Ketils saga hængs* and perhaps by *Örvar-Odds saga*, but the relationship of the latter two tales must remain a hypothesis until a detailed study of the works in their entirety is completed. It is hoped that a computer concordance of the mythical-heroic sagas currently in progress will soon solve this and other problems relating to this genre of Icelandic literature.


³ In *Ketils saga* the wounded giant returns to the cave, where his friends laugh at his discomfort. When the giant says he needs ointment, not rebuke, Ketill enters, says he is a doctor, and when the others leave without explanation, he quickly deals his opponent a fatal blow.